

Most museums are all about success. At the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., you can see the 1903 Wright Flyer, the Apollo 11 Command Module, and Neil Armstrong's spacesuit. You can even visit a studio model of the starship *Enterprise*, from the "Star Trek" television series.

At the Louvre in Paris, you can look at the statue "Winged Victory of Samothrace," the painting "Liberty Leading the People," the statue "Venus de Milo," and, of course, the most famous painting in the world, "The Mona Lisa."

Whether these museums focus on space exploration, artwork, or other events from history, they contain the best of the best. But where can we find the things that flop? Well, the Museum of Failure in Brooklyn, N.Y., "paints an epic portrait of failures both big and small," says *Fast Company* magazine. The collection is full of objects, games, robots and other experiments, from Google Glass to the Segway to the "overhyped Ford Edsel."

At the Museum of Failure, for example, you can see a model of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Swedish warship *Vasa*, which sank just 1,400 yards into its maiden voyage. *Vasa* was a powerfully armed vessel, but she was dangerously unstable. With too much weight in her upper structure, she capsized after encountering a light wind.

You can even ponder the "Springblade" running shoes, by Adidas. The shoe has 16 curved "blades" that are supposed to make you feel "like you have springs under your feet." Introduced back in 2013, they were judged to be too heavy for serious runners. Then, there was a big recall in 2015 because the blades kept breaking.

You can also learn about a World War Two aircraft carrier that was supposed to be built on top of a floating iceberg. Failures, flops, misfires. Every single one of them.

Sure, we can laugh at the exhibits in the Museum of Failure, but we can also learn from them. “You have to take risks,” says the curator of the museum. “If designers were less afraid of failure, or less fearful of getting negatively judged by their peers, we’d see more great design.”

As followers of Christ, I imagine that we are all well aware that Jesus knows that there are times in life when we have to take risks, which is why he commends several of the slaves in his famous story involving the parable of the talents. In particular, he praises the slaves who trade their talents to make more talents. Yes, he knows that they may end up with poor results, but he commends them for not being afraid of failure or negative judgment.

Now, before we dig into this parable, it is important for us to look at how the word “slave” is used in this passage. An Old Testament professor named Samuel Adams has written that slavery “in all periods of human history, especially in relation to the biblical texts, remains one of the more tragic, complex, and essential topics to explore. The biblical authors refer to slavery as a common practice in the ancient world and frequently use slave metaphors.”

If that is the case, how are we to understand the slave metaphors that Jesus uses? For starters, when Jesus talks of slavery, he is not talking about the chattel slavery practiced in the United States prior to the Civil War. This was a form of slavery based entirely on race, and it enabled the treatment of Blacks as property — bought, sold and owned forever.

Instead, the word “slave” in the Bible refers to people in a variety of situations, from forced labor to domestic service. Some became slaves when they were captured in war; others would voluntarily become slaves to escape poverty. To be a slave was never a desirable position to be in, but it was not necessarily a permanent state of affairs, nor was it based on race. Slaves could be freed if relatives redeemed them by paying a debt or a ransom.

So, when Jesus tells the parable of the talents, he is not talking about chattel slavery. Rather, the slaves in the parable were servants who had a great deal of responsibility for the oversight of their master's property. When the master went on a journey, he "summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." Being that a talent was a huge amount of money, worth about 20 years of a laborer's wages, the man was giving them control over enormous resources.

Even the slave with the one talent was put in charge of an amount that would roughly be about \$680,000 today, but he doesn't do anything with it. Unlike the five-talent slave who used his resources to make five more talents, and the two-talent slave who made two more talents, the one-talent slave hid his talent in the ground. So, it isn't all that surprising to hear Jesus declare that the first two received the commendation of their master, while the third was condemned for being "wicked and lazy."

"The message for us is clear," says religion professor Daniel Ott: "to take the easy road, to be lukewarm, never to take a stand, really is not to live at all. The one who buries his treasure will never gain anything. The one who is neither hot nor cold really has no temperature at all." Or, as the curator of the Museum of Failure said, "You have to take risks." And the same is true for us, in our personal and congregational lives. If we bury our treasures, we will never gain anything. There is nothing wrong with using our abilities and resources in bold and risky ways, even if some of our efforts end up in the Museum of Failure.

The good news of this parable is that God gives each of us a set of valuable talents to use in the world. In this case, the word "talent" does not mean \$680,000, but instead a natural or acquired ability. A valuable talent — for music, sports, hospitality, public speaking, artwork, empathy, mathematics, poetry, construction, cooking, sewing or some other ability — is given to each one of us. It is fitting that

the word “talent” works both as an ancient word for a unit of money and a modern word for ability.

When we focus on the talents that we have been given, the challenge of the parable shifts from taking a risk to placing our trust in God. And what an important shift that is. In the parable, the master gives talents to each slave, “to each according to his ability.” Each of them is given a valuable talent. Then the man goes away, trusting them to make use of their gifts in ways that are in line with his purposes.

The first two slaves trust in their master’s goodness and use their talents appropriately. The third slave does not. The mistake of the wicked servant is not in failing to trust the market, but in failing to trust the master. His poor management strategy is to operate out of fear rather than gratitude and faith.

Of course, I would imagine that we can all agree that there are times when we make that mistake ourselves, don’t we? We fail to trust the Master who has given us such amazing talents to use in our personal and congregational lives. So often, we do not appreciate the abilities we have been given to tutor a child, encourage a friend, plan a budget, cook a meal, teach a class, coach a team, mentor a colleague, sew a quilt, play an instrument, sing in a choir, or do a repair for a neighbor. The use of these gifts can enhance our own lives and advance the mission and ministry of Jesus.

So, don’t worry about failing to trust the market. The market goes up and down, and it is impossible to predict. Did you know that when Apple introduced its Apple Watch back in 2015, some people thought that it was destined for the Museum of Failure? After all, watches and smartphones are everywhere, and you have to wonder if they really need to be combined. But today, the Apple Watch reigns over the smartwatch market, with over 100 million active users. Apple had a vision, took a chance, and enjoyed great success.

As Christians, however, our goal is to trust the Master instead of the market. God has given us incredible gifts, to use in a variety of ways to extend the mission of Jesus. And these are wonderful words for us to hear, especially on a day like today as we meet to discuss next year's budget and to consider where God might be leading the ministry of our congregation. Instead of denying our talents and burying them in the ground, we can put them to work and double God's investment in us.

So, let's not worry about ending up in the Museum of Failure. Instead, we can put fear aside and forget about failure and judgment. With the talents we have been given, with faith and God's grace, we can accomplish everything that God wants us to do. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.